

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

De-formations

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 24 (2019)

URL:

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2019/24-de-formations/de-formations>

doi:

<https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2019.24.1958>

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

deformations; norms; otherness; illness; alternative

abstract:

Introduction to issue 24 "De-formations".

-

De-formations

Look left
 Look down
 Look up
 Look right
 The camera flash
 Atomic bright
 Photos
 The CMV - a green moon then the world turns magenta
 My retina
 Is a distant planet
 A red Mars
 From a Boy's Own comic
 With yellow infection
 Bubbling at the corner
 I said this looks like a planet
 The doctor says - "Oh, I think
 It looks like a pizza"¹

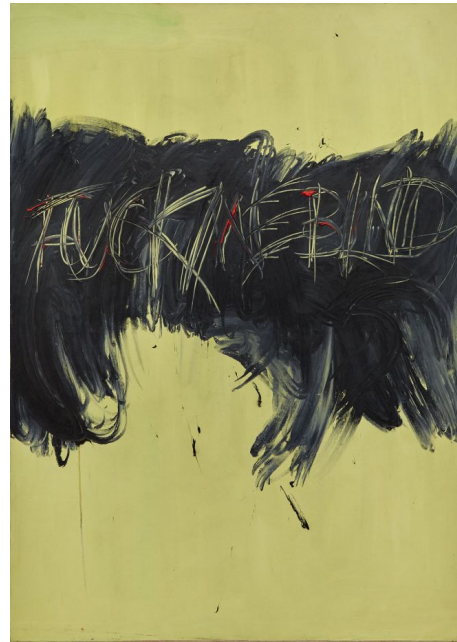
By the end of 1992 Derek Jarman had returned to the idea of a film with no imagery, to a flat International Klein-blue screen (according to its inventor the color was an evocation of the void and the immaterial). This time, Jarman returned at a time of disease; a disease which was depriving him of vision and ultimately of life. Jarman had addressed the experience of being infected earlier, in his late paintings; *Blue* was how he responded in the language of cinema, taking film to its limit, immobilizing the moving image and infecting it with narratives, taking us on a monochrome and polyphonic trip through war in Bosnia, internal war with AIDS, friends killing themselves, excruciating pain, refugees arriving, Jarman hoping for something to come after life was over. The perfect non-image on screen became filled and thus de-formed by the many scraps of stories his voice

and others' voices shared with us.

In the sphere of visual culture, as in many other areas, various forms of life and creativity are accompanied by processes of destruction, mutilation and forgetfulness. Here, these seemingly negative or traumatizing processes are at the same time also introducing new images, forms of visibility as well as perceptions, thus expanding the very notion of creativity. More often than not these remain at the margins of the normative (thus acceptable, praised, pleasurable, etc),

recognized as de-formed or mal-formed. Such an organization of this field is never stable, always historically changeable, negotiable, yet still frustratingly attached to binaries. The growing trend for "decolonizing" numerous dimensions of human life, activity, and perception, among other things, brings with it an eagerness to explore the outsides of known forms and formats as well as curiosity verging on courageousness in detaching the de- or the mal- from the array of negative affects which for too long have been associated with them, and instead finding in them the alternative modes of being in the world and of accessing the world of being.

When considering this issue of *View*, we were imagining situations when our encounters with the world alter our ways of seeing (at times in an unpleasant and violent manner), when we are de-formed (literally, though not necessarily physically) by what we see and begin questioning how we see it, no longer being able to remain an informed (knowledgeable) onlooker. We were thus thinking of an agency of "alternative" formations which



Derek Jarman, *Fuck me blind*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 251 x 179 cm (WG/DJAR00514).
Courtesy Amanda Wilkinson Gallery,
London and Keith Collins Will Trust

have long been denied access as forms on their own, without the discrediting de-. We have plunged into the materiality of mutilations, destructions and imperfections (either as a product of historical or biological processes) to see how this materiality's specific exemplifications perform and operate: what agency do they have, when and how are they rejected and/or accepted (and as what), and by whom? Our objectives have been both epistemological and affective.

As subjects formatted in processes of upbringing and education, we know our procedures of ordering and compartmentalizing, we know what needs to be fixed (and when) in order for it to work properly. Yet the "improper" workings of bodies and objects have long been overlooked or looked at in a biased manner. The de-formed perception as a primary or acquired condition opens up, beyond the boundaries of the perfect and the able, first to stress that they are constructed, conventional, and ambivalent if not violent. The de-formed images, objects and visions do not serve us as metaphors, but rather as exceptionally charged elements of the visual culture which demand engagement and conversation. The 24th issue of *View* is an attempt at such a conversation where various voices and perspectives meet and correspond.

In *Closeup* we present a Polish translation of an essay entitled *Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account* by Georgina Kleege, the author of at least two powerful books *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006) and *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018). Kleege argues against what she calls "the stock characters of the Western philosophical tradition," such as the "blind man," and instead argues for countering them (and this kind of theoretical reflection) with accounts of real-life experiences of blindness as encountered in autobiographical narratives. In *Splendid Deformities*, meanwhile, Alex Burchmore argues for an

emancipatory critique of cultural homogeneity in the name of diversity in Hong Kong-born, New York-based artist Sin-Ying Ho's ceramic sculptures. The author's historical excursions include 12th-century attitudes to both undesirable and desirable kiln-damaged wares in China, 18th-century attitudes to Chinoiserie in Britain, and numerous historically differing ideas of cultural and aesthetic purity. These temporal shifts and reinterpretations provide a background for Paweł Mościcki's discussion of Robert Rauschenberg's *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's 'Inferno'* (1958–1960), where Mościcki concentrates on the artist's method, the quasi-technique of "solvent transfer", as well as anachronisms and the practice of "unsensing the subjective." Among the various media and genres relating to historical time and the formation of historical experience and knowledge, photography plays a privileged role. In his essay Tomasz Szerszeń investigates the color of history and historical disaster in Boris Mikhailov's photographic meditations on the decline of the Soviet Union and the so-called "Chernobyl effect", especially – as he himself states – "in the context of the political visibility / invisibility of radiation." Sara Herczyńska's *Wreaths and Creases: The Case of Marianna Dolińska* discusses a strikingly graphic 1920s photograph depicting four dead children hanged on a tree – killed by their mother, and the deformation of its historical reference in the 1990s when it began to serve as an iconic image of the massacre of Polish people in Volhynia. The photograph itself was deformed by a kind of scratch or a cut. The article convincingly discusses many forms of violence and deformation involved in the story of this one image: the desire to see and an equally strong desire not to see.

In *Viewpoint* we continue with reflections on photography, this time by means of multi-media artist Dorota Buczkowska – educated as an art conservator and sculptor – playing with archives. The artist's interventions deal with photographic materiality or even corporeality, its uncanniness and ghostliness.

The artist encounters imagined monsters and possible reparations. Our commentators, Czeczot and Bojarska, through an analogous operation on some archives of literary testimonies from retreats, asylums, and traumatic lives, treat her practice as a form of artistic or artisan healing, or possibly self-healing, an act of phantasmatic self-inspection. Human and photographic matter meet, intersect, and clash - "not with a bang but a whimper". Additionally, a presentation of selected projects by Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan concentrates on what Joanna Sokołowska calls the practice of "transforming and reassembling broken and deformed fragments of reality" in order to know "how things can be remembered, narrated, heard or seen." This practice aims to offer new forms of togetherness, where that which comes together meets on multiple levels and for numerous reasons, and the distribution of attention, care and empathy works according to rules negotiated anew.

In *Panorama*, film theorist and critic, Paulina Kwiatkowska, highlights the imperfections in Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), the elements of which bring numerous interpretations to an impasse, their visual density seeming almost impenetrable, mostly owing to technical cinematic procedures. The author looks closely at what desires and expectations are triggered in viewers by the film's representations of inner and outer realities. In her *Facing That Which Vanishes*, Anna Zarychta, a scholar of photography, concentrates on the invisible (or not quite invisible) elements of so-called "hidden mother" photographs, made popular via a 2013 archival artistic project by Linda F. Nagler. The author questions the assumption behind the title of the project, thus trying to save complicated historical, social and cultural contexts from a reductive and flattening reception. She argues that this context can be related to the visual bizarreness and uncanniness of the photographic material. The bizarre is an epithet that suits the so-called "weird kids' videos" discussed by cultural studies

scholar, Piotr Fortuna. They came to public attention in 2017 with a controversy dubbed *Elsagate*. Videos on YouTube that targeted kids were hacked by those with inappropriate motives to include sexual scenes and graphic violence. The author roots his analysis in a reflection on “platform capitalism”, considering the phenomenon of weird kids’ videos as a symptom of a profound cultural change, illustrating a shift from disciplinary societies to those of control, where technology and the rhythms of algorithms play a crucial role. Next, museum and archeology scholar, Monika Stobiecka, discusses various conservation and reconstruction procedures employed in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens. She claims they are expressions of the pursuit of the ideal and completeness, something seemingly at odds with the sentimental aesthetics of ancient remains. The author works on “archaeological prostheses,” i.e. artificial supplements in place of a lack or deformity, combining the visual dimension of digital media and the materiality of conservation. Last but not least, theatre scholar Katarzyna Ojrzyńska offers a compelling discussion of how people with non-standard bodies have restricted access to acting, and how this has been questioned and protested against in the US and UK. Referring to recent developments in Polish theatre and film, the author reflects on possible new ways of imagining actors and acting outside of the normative paradigm.

Perspectives offer profuse and multidimensional takes on visual pedagogies: researchers, artists, curators, and critics from Poland and Britain (editors of the *Journal of Visual Culture*, curators and academic teachers) exchange ideas on how to participate and consciously shape interventions in the public sphere via the use of images and art-visual means of communication, making use of images as agents of political and social change. This discussion takes place at an exceptional time when many people feel a sense of urgency in the face of crisis

and the all too speedy changing global situation where everyone seems implicated, if not complicit, and which demands bold and immediate responses. We are not offering that many ready-made solutions, but instead some recipes for cultivating visual literacy and political imagination.

In *Snapshots* you will find critical responses to three recent and resonant publications in the field of visual and art studies: Agata Pietrasik writes on Luiza Nader's *Strzemiński's Affect* (2019), Łukasz Moll writes on Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (2009 / Polish translation 2019), and Jakub Majmurek responds to Michał Piepiórka's *Rockefellers and Marx over Warsaw: Polish Films facing Economic Transformation* (2019).

Editorial team

- 1 [Derek Jarman, *Blue*, Copyright 1993 The Estate of Derek Jarman & Basilisk Communications Ltd.](#)

